Interviewee: Ray Toelle
Interviewer: Thomas Saylor
Date of interview: 22 July 2004
Location: by telephone to the Toelle residence in Milwaukee, WI
Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2004
Editing by: Thomas Saylor, December 2004

Ray Toelle was born on 14 November 1923 in Arpen, Wisconsin. He grew up there, and graduated from Wisconsin Rapids High School in 1941. Ray worked briefly at a local paper mill before entering the US Army Air Corps in November 1943.

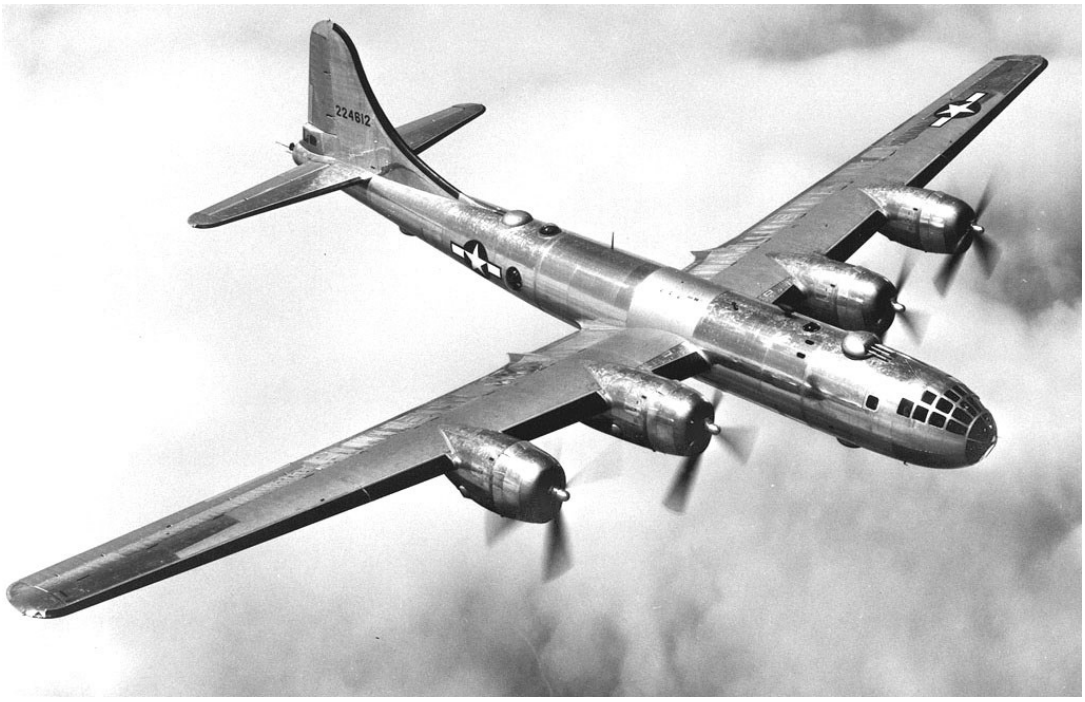
Ray served with the 498th Bomb Group, 73rd Bomb Wing, 20th Air Force, based on the Pacific island of Saipan, and was a tail gunner on a B-29 Superfortress four-engine heavy bomber. He completed his first combat mission in November 1944, and by May 1945 had completed a total of twenty-four.

While on an incendiary raid over Tokyo on the night of 24-25 May 1945, though, Ray's B-29 was hit by ground fire and shot down. He managed to parachute out of the burning aircraft, and was taken prisoner when he landed.

For the remainder of the Pacific War, Ray was a POW of the Japanese. After an initial interrogation, he was held at Ofuna, a naval prison in Kamakura, by Yokohama, and for some weeks at a remote airfield near Aomori, on northern Honshu. When the war ended in mid-August 1945, Ray had been returned to Ofuna; US Marines evacuated all prisoners from this camp in early September.

Because of untreated burns to his hands suffered when his aircraft was shot down, Ray spent months recovering in medical facilities—Letterman Army Hospital in San Francisco and Crile Military Hospital in Cleveland. He was discharged in January 1947.

Again a civilian, Ray worked in the grocery retail business for nearly thirty years, retiring in the late 1970s. He was married in 1950 (wife Helen), and helped to raise four children. Ray was active for many years in the Milwaukee chapter of American Ex-Prisoners of War, until the chapter disbanded in August 2014.



B-29 Superfortress in flight, 1945.
Source: official Army Air Corps photograph, courtesy of US Air Force

<u>Interview key</u>:
T = Thomas Saylor
R = Ray Toelle
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 22 July 2004 and this an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking by telephone with Mr. Ray Toelle of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. First, Mr. Toelle, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

For the record, you were born in the town of Arpen, Wisconsin, on 14 November 1923. You grew up in Wisconsin Rapids, and graduated from Wisconsin Rapids High School, class of 1941. In November of 1943 you entered military service with the Army Air Corps. You were later discharged in January 1947. In 1944 and 1945 you were a tail gunner on a B-29 Superfortress aircraft flying with the 73rd Bomb Wing, 498th Bomb Group. You flew from the island of Saipan, in the Pacific. As a tail gunner you completed twenty-four and a half missions, I believe we said, after first flying in November of 1944. Your plane was downed on a mission over Tokyo, on 24 May 1945. The first thing I wanted to ask you, Ray, going back to November of 1944, can you remember the first mission that you flew?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. The first one we flew was going to be a bombing mission on Tokyo. That was a daytime mission. When we got almost to Tokyo we had engine trouble, so our pilot broke off formation and we went on by ourselves. We went to the northern part of Japan a little bit. We dropped our bombs and then we were able to get back to Saipan. But our mission didn't count because it was cloudy and we had no photos of what we had done and what we hit. So it was just a flight up and back, and that was it. But that was the first one we were on.

T: As a tail gunner, how often did you actually use your guns against enemy aircraft?

R: We never did. I never shot once.

T: So in twenty-four missions you <u>never</u> used your guns?

R: No. No.

T: Did you see enemy aircraft occasionally?

R: Not on our runs. It was a real funny thing. When we were flying during the day, the daytime missions, now, our group always went in behind somebody else. Like there were ten planes. We generally had about ten or twelve planes in a group. The planes would go in ahead of us, and they would call back on the radio that the

fighters were heavy and everything. We were all set. We'd go in and we wouldn't see a fighter. We found out later on that those fighters, they had enough gas to just last that time and then they'd go down and refill. So we were always going in when all the fighters were down. So we never shot a shell.

T: Was flak a problem on the missions you were on?

R: Oh, yes. We had a lot of flak. But that was all. When we first started flying, we were flying so high the flak didn't even get up to us.

T: So you went through that transition of the high altitude missions down to the low altitude missions.

R: That's right.

T: From your perspective as a tail gunner, seeing the war backwards in a sense, out the back of the aircraft, the high altitude missions and those low altitude missions, how were they different from your perspective?

R: The low ones were bad. Those we flew by ourselves. Each plane went in by itself. It was at night, so you couldn't see anything. If there were fighters up there, you couldn't see them until they strafed you or something. That would be the first you would see. Because it was all black.

T: Right.

R: And the day missions. Like I say, we were up so high that we never saw fighters even.

(1, A, 45)

T: Those low level missions, the missions dropping incendiaries, how many of those do you recall flying?

R: Most of my twenty-five missions were, at least ten or fifteen of them were low altitude jobs. We were flying an awful lot at night. After they found out that when we were flying all these high altitude missions, we were missing the targets. By miles. So General [Curtis] LeMay came over to our group from Europe and he says, You guys are going down on the ground. And it's going to be incendiary bombs. Nothing big. The heavy stuff. So we started flying night missions all the time.

T: When you got that news that the altitude was going down, way down, as far as where you were going to be flying, how did that make you feel?

R: Everybody, they just didn't know what to say. Because when we got shot down that night, we were at 5800 feet. That's low. But you're all by yourself. And if you

have a cloudy night or if you're scheduled to fly a little later than the other groups, you had it made because it was all smoke. They couldn't see you. But the night we got shot down, for some reason or other, this airplane we flew in, we flew our first mission in that airplane. And our last. That night we got shot down it flew so good. We got up there before the Pathfinder did even. Almost. In fact, the Pathfinder got shot down right ahead of us. We saw it. And we came right behind him. The same altitude. We got hit too.

T: You flew it the first and the last mission. Did you fly it every other mission too, the same plane?

R: Yes. We had a good airplane.

T: Plane number forty-eight you said, right?

R: Right.

T: Have a name?

R: Antoinette. They took the ladies off after a while, so we just had a number on it.

T: So there was artwork on there for a while.

R: Yes. Until some general's wife came over, and she didn't think it was too nice an idea to have all the ladies on those airplanes. So they took them all off.

T: And then you just had your number.

R: Yes.

T: Well, if you can, can you walk us through the mission of 24 May? You'd been on a lot of missions before this—twenty-four. What happened that particular night?

R: The night we left… See, we would leave Saipan about eight o'clock at night. Our pilot that we had, the original pilot that we flew over with got out of flying airplanes. He went to headquarters. So we got another pilot that had been over there. From a different group. He flew all the missions with us except that last night. He was one mission ahead of us. So they were trying to get everybody lined up so that they'd all go home together. So they kept him back that night and we had a substitute commander that was one mission behind his crew. So he flew with us.

T: So he needed to catch up a mission.

R: Yes. So he flew with us. It was an altogether different night. When we got up to the airplane… Now, our copilot was the one that was commander that night. Ordinarily, in the afternoon we would go up to the NCO Club and we'd have a few

beers and stuff and joke around. We'd go and fix our guns up and stuff, and that was about it. All we had to do. That night we got up at the flight line and our pilot got us all lined up and checked all of our stuff over—which you never did before. Because we had everything done. Then he said a few prayers before we got on the airplane. It was just a night that…you could tell something was wrong.

(1, A, 88)

T: So your airplane commander was going to be your normal copilot.

R: Right. He was our normal copilot, and then he was the commander that night. And on the way up there our engineer kept saying, "This airplane is flying so good. We've got too much speed. We were going to get there before we were supposed to."

T: Were you a superstitious type that had a certain routine that you went through before a mission, or a good luck charm or something that you had with you?

R: Not really. No. No. I just used to say a few little prayers when we were taking off. When we made our turn up on the runway, there was a Catholic priest there and a regular minister there. They'd bless the airplane and everything. They'd give you the sign of the cross and stuff. I always saw them there. This little guy, he was a little Irishman. So we'd wave to him. Because we always took off like eight o'clock. It was light out yet. He'd wave to us. Of course, I was always the last one to see him, because I always flew in the tail. I always took off in the tail and landed in the tail. I flew all the missions. The whole mission on all the other ones in the tail. I never left it. Because I figured that was the safest place on the airplane.

T: As an aside, the trip up and back, that's ten, twelve, fourteen hours in the air.

R: Yes. We had fourteen hours, fifteen, sixteen sometimes. Seventeen hours. Yes.

T: How did you—my daughter asked me once about a long mission—how did you pass the time by yourself back there?

R: We had radio in the airplane, and we had music taped to our headphones. We always headphones on. Then after we got up closer to Japan, then we would pick up Tokyo Rose. She was always broadcasting. So they'd tune her in. We'd listen to her. She'd tell us about all the guys that got shot down the night before and all that stuff. Time went pretty fast. It was surprising. Once we got past Iwo Jima and about halfway back, then I would just call in and tell them, "Keep an eye on the tail, I'm going to take a few minutes break back here." I maybe slept for an hour or so in the back. The waist gunners would take over. Then after a while they would wake me up and then I'd get back up again.

T: So you could move from the tail to the back section there?

R: No. Just in the tail section. The tail section was big. There was a lot of room back there in that tail section.

T: More than the B-17s?

R: Oh, yes. I could stand up back there. In fact, I could even lay down back there. It was big. There was a lot of room back there.

T: What happened on that night of the twenty-fourth, Ray? Was your plane hit by ground fire?

R: Yes. When we got to Japan, we always looked for Mt. Fuji, and that was the turning point. As soon as we saw that, we would turn in and head into Tokyo. So there Mt. Fuji was, and it was all overcast. Solid clouds. We saw Mt. Fuji and the radar man would give the—he would be checking the radar to see where we were supposed to go. Then we made the turn and were heading into Tokyo. We were still in clouds. Clouds were below us. Beautiful. We said, "This is going to be a milk run tonight." So we just got to Tokyo, and it looked like somebody took a big knife and just cut a great big round hole in there. It was just as clear as a bell.

So as soon as we got into this area, the searchlights caught us right away. They followed us in. Our pilot that we had that night, he wouldn't go one way or the other. He just flew straight in. The Pathfinder was right ahead of us. Same altitude. All of a sudden we saw him go down. He was hit. We came right behind and we got hit in the nose. They killed the bombardier. We were on the bomb run. It took the nose out and the bombardier was killed. So then we dropped down maybe one thousand feet before the pilot got the airplane under control again, because the bombardier was in control of the airplane.

(1, A, 144)

T: Right. On the bomb run.

R: Right. So we finally got control of the airplane. Instead of the pilot salvaging the bombs right then and there, he got back on the bomb run again. It wouldn't have made any difference. We could have dropped those bombs anyplace there, because we were over Tokyo. But we got a little bit farther and all of a sudden we got hit again. This time we got hit in number two engine. Then they finally salvaged the bombs because we knew we were going to have to get out of there. We started to burn a little bit, and then we headed out to Tokyo Bay. The pilot asked the navigator for the heading to get out to the bay. We headed out to the bay and then he called back to me and asked me was there any fire? I said, "Yes. It's burning." So they feathered the engine. Figured maybe it would go out. But it didn't do any good. In fact, it started to burn more after that. Then he called back again and he said, "How are we doing?" I said, "We gotta get out of here. This fire is coming way back to the tail now. We're going to blow up before long." He said, "Okay, everybody get out.

Let's go!" Rang the bell. Then we were supposed to get out of the airplane. That's when I said, "Tail gunner leaving." Like I say, once I unhooked my earphones I didn't hook them back up again. That's when I got caught, and then I couldn't get out.

T: Again for the record, it was your seat cushion which was a life raft.

R: Yes.

T: Was it too bulky to get out of the window with?

R: As I stood up…the seat pushes back and it goes underneath a ways. And there was no way to get it out. It was just caught. I didn't know enough… When you're in a hurry and see that fire coming there, you want to get out. I saw too many of them blow up. So I just unhooked my chute, that's all, from this one man life raft. But I had a Mae West [life vest] on yet, so if I would have landed in the bay I would have still probably had a chance to swim to shore. I don't know.

T: When you got out of the plane, you burned your hands before you got out of the plane, right?

R: Yes.

T: When you exited you weren't…the altitude of the plane was not very high.

R: No. We probably were higher because we were on our way out. We probably were higher than we were on the bomb run. We probably were at seven, eight thousand feet by then.

T: And that's enough time to get your chute open safely.

R: Oh, yes. Plenty of time.

T: Now was this your first parachute jump?

R: Yes. The one and only.

T: So you haven't gone back and done it again *(laughing)*.

R: *(chuckling)* No.

T: When you're out of the plane now and your chute is open, did you give any thought to what was going to happen when you hit the ground?

R: Yes. I figured I was over water.

T: But you couldn't see for sure?

R: No. No. You couldn't see anything down below. There were no lights or anything. So I unhooked my chute so that in case I hit the water I could get out of it. I had everything unhooked and I was just hanging onto the part of the chute. As I was coming down, I turned myself to go the way the wind was blowing, and when I did that I had my hands up on the shroud lines and I could see that my hands were burned because the skin was hanging. I could see my hands. I said, "Aw, what the heck now?" I didn't realize that I had burned my legs and my face too. I had a helmet on and an oxygen mask. I left that on. For what reason, I don't know. It was a good thing, because I just got burned around my forehead and my eyes. Then my legs got burned from my ankles to my knees. On both of them. Of course, my jacket was on fire. I burned the sleeves off my jacket. But when I bailed out of course, the fire went out on that. But when I landed, I figured I was going to land in the water. But all of a sudden I hit the ground, and I hit awful hard.

(1, A, 201)

T: You weren't expecting it.

R: No. No. I expected the water to come up. I hit awful hard, and the parachute stayed [in a tree]. I landed right next to a house. I wasn't any more than twenty-five feet away from this house. There was a tree there and the chute stayed in the tree, and that's why I couldn't really land the way you're supposed to. Then I just stepped out of my chute and I saw this old man standing over there a little ways. I went over to him and gave myself up. First I was going to go knock on the door of this house, but I saw this old guy there and thought probably he was from this house. So then he just took me up—there were two soldiers up on the hill there. Of course, they tore my helmet off. My helmet had burned into my forehead and they pulled that off. I had a watch on. They ripped that off. They searched you for stuff.

T: Did they search you for what you had with you?

R: Yes. See, we always carried .45s [caliber pistol] with us. But I didn't have mine with me. I threw it away.

T: Did you leave it in the plane, or what did you do?

R: I don't know what happened to it. It either fell out as I bailed out or whatever. I didn't have it. I just had my holster on. That was it.

T: Had you given any thought before this particular night about what might happen to you if you were ever shot down?

R: We didn't really know anybody that got shot down, see? The only thing—we would listen to Tokyo Rose and she'd tell us what happened to people. And until after the war was over when I talked to—I had a friend that got shot down about a

month before I did, and he was the only one survived his airplane. But he was shot down during the day. And all of his crew that got out were killed by civilians. It wasn't the army you had to worry about. It was the civilians.

T: Is that something that you knew or suspected even before you were shot down?

R: No, we didn't. No. We didn't know anything. They never told us. Because nobody came back to tell us that.

T: So you had rumors or what you heard from…

R: This was after the war was over.

T: Did the Air Corps do anything to prepare aircrews about what to do if your plane goes down?

R: They told you just give your name and rank and that's it. But when we got shot down they already told us, tell them whatever you want to. Because there were so many shot down ahead of us. If they knew that the atomic bomb was coming at that time…I don't know. But they kind of said tell them whatever they want to know.

T: So the old name, rank, and serial number was not something you were told you had to adhere to.

R: Not really.

T: You could tell them as much as a tail gunner could tell them.

R: Yes. Right.

(1, A, 244)

T: And luckily, it sounds for you, you landed at night and near only one civilian, who was not unfriendly.

R: Yes. He was an old man. He was an old man, and he had a big pole. Even if he's an old guy, I'm not going to try to fight. What could I do? You're there.

T: What went through your mind there as you first were on the ground?

R: I looked at my hands. I didn't know my legs were burned or my face. I knew my hands were burned. I could see on my jacket. I didn't have much of my jacket left. The only thing I had on my jacket was where my parachute harness was. That was left of my jacket. The rest was all burned away. I thought well, maybe they will do something decent. But then, when they took me up to these two soldiers that were

there…the pilot and copilot must have landed close to me. Because they brought them over there too.

T: So there were three of you there then.

R: There was three of us there. And then of course, they blindfolded you and tied my hands behind my back and they tied them so tight. And they were hurting the way it was. So then they marched us to this little town—through a little town. And this is where that Navy base was.

T: The first place you were.

R: Yes.

T: And this is not Ofuna [Naval interrogation center]. This is another place.

R: No. This is on the other side of the bay someplace yet. And then on the way in, well, of course there were civilians there. They threw rocks at you and they hit you with sticks and stuff. The guards didn't do anything about it.

T: Were you concerned at that point for your life?

R: Well, I don't know. I wasn't thinking of what's going to happen. Then when we got to this camp, we went in and they interrogated you. We had made out that this was our first mission. We all were going to tell them that. So they wanted to know how we got shot down and how many missions we were on, and when we told them one mission and we got shot down by anti-aircraft they were all happy about that.

T: Were you interrogated by yourself or with other members of your crew?

R: No. I was by myself. But they must have interrogated my pilot first because they said, "You were with Bolene." That was our pilot's name.

T: That's his last name? Bolene?

R: Yes. Bolene. And I said, "Yes. He was my pilot." That was it. But the funny part about the—they put me out in a cage like. In this big room. I could hear this water dripping and I looked down on the floor and there was puddles of water there, and I said, "What the heck is this from?" Because I couldn't see. There was no water there. But here it was from my hands.

T: They were dripping liquid?

R: Yes. The water. The blisters. My hands were all blistered. The blisters were breaking. Then after a while I could feel my feet were getting wet. And the blisters

on my legs were breaking, and the water was running out of there down into my socks.

Then after that they put me over into a building. It was like a little hospital evidently. They took my blindfold off and they took off the handcuffs and stuff. There was two fellows in there. They had white clothes on. They cut the skin off that was hanging on my hands. They put, they let me look in the mirror, and I could see my forehead where it was burned, around my eyes. When I looked—underneath this blindfold that they put on, I could see a little bit, but I couldn't see with my right eye. And I couldn't figure out what the heck was wrong with that. But here I had gotten a piece of metal in my right eye, and it was all swelling up. So I couldn't see. But I could see out of my left eye. They cut the skin off and they wrapped my hands up with…it wasn't a paper and it wasn't a cloth. I don't know what it was.

Then all of a sudden the air raid went off. So they ran me outside and they put me in an air raid shelter for a little while with their guard. Then as soon as the air raid went clear again, then they took me out of there. Then they had the pilot and copilot. They were still there yet too. We walked up to the airfield and we got on a little airplane. It looked like an AT-6.

(1, A, 326)

T: Little trainer [aircraft].

R: Yes. It had a bigger area in the middle where you could stand up. The three of us were in there. Pilot and copilot and myself, and a couple officers. We flew over Tokyo Bay to the other side. On the way over I said, "This is a heck of a thing!" You see, P-51s used to come from Iwo Jima and they would strafe everything that was in sight. I said, "We're going to get shot down yet over here." But we got across. That was in the morning.

T: How many of you were in that plane flying over the bay there? How many Americans? Could you tell?

R: Just the three of us.

T: Just the three of you from your own crew.

R: Yes. Pilot and copilot and myself.

T: How long had you been at that first facility?

R: Well, probably from about maybe three o'clock or four o'clock until maybe about nine o'clock or so, or ten.

T: So they didn't keep you there.

R: Oh, no.

T: Not even twenty-four hours.

R: Oh, no. No.

T: From your recollection, were you interrogated just once?

R: Yes. That's all.

T: By someone who spoke English?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. They could speak English real good.

T: How long did that interrogation last?

R: Just a few minutes only.

T: And from the way you described it, more general questions than anything else.

R: Well, yes. They just asked my where I was from and stuff like that. Then when I told them that we were just a fill in crew that just came over, they didn't say anything anymore.

T: Your stories, because you had agreed ahead of time about the first mission story, you'd all told them the same thing.

R: Right. Everybody said the same thing. So there was nothing wrong about that.

T: So the next day there you, all three of you now, are arriving at Ofuna.

R: We got a train way up there wherever we came across. And we sat on the train until about nine o'clock at night. But we went to Ofuna then. They got us off there in Ofuna. It was dark then already. The three of us—I was in the motorcycle handcart. A three-wheeled motorcycle they put me on. The pilot and copilot, too. We went to the Ofuna Prison Camp, which was maybe about a half a mile away from the town itself.

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 386.

T: …you are in this car.

R: We each were in one by ourselves.

T: So there was like a caravan of three of these things.

R: Three of us went, yes.

T: Were you still blindfolded at this point?

R: Yes. Yes. We were still tied up yet, with our hands behind our back.

T: What kind of pain did you have, because of the burns, by this time?

R: I didn't feel much anymore. I was starting to get pretty bad then. When we got to Ofuna they took off the blindfold and they took off the handcuffs, whatever they had there. And they just took me down and put me in a cell. That was it. It was dark then already. When I went into this little cell, it was only about six by eight is all the bigger it was. Nothing in it but two blankets. That was it.

T: And you. No one else was in there.

R: No. No. We all were by ourselves in this camp. There was nobody together. No. We were in solitary. They just closed the door, and that was it.

T: Just to double check. You were at Ofuna there until, you estimate, about mid or late July?

R: Yes.

T: So that's a period of two months.

R: Yes. About two months. Yes.

T: The time you were there, were you in solitary confinement the entire time?

R: Yes. Right. Yes.

T: Did you have any contact with other Americans there at Ofuna?

R: No. No [contact with anyone]. Just at night, when we had to call our number off. I was number five. And we had to call our number off, and that was it.

T: And what was that for?

R: Well, I don't know. They wanted to know if you were still there, I guess *(laughs)*. Where do they think you'd be going? See, there were three barracks in there. We were in the small barracks. There was only ten of us in this barracks. Five on each side. Then there was another barracks a little farther over. But there were fences between all these. That was our area. That was it.

T: So there was this small barracks of single cells.

R: Right. Yes.

T: So you were aware that there were other people in this camp…

R: Well, yes, because we could hear them. Guards hollering at them and stuff. But all the windows were boarded up. And of course, you didn't want to—I couldn't see anyway. I couldn't stand up, because my legs were really bad then the next day after that. I was in bad shape. They took me to what they call a…he was called the doctor, but he wasn't really a doctor. But they took me over there in the morning. These older guys that had been there, they all took a number and said well, he's going to be number seven or eight for the hill. Because they didn't figure I was going to make it.

T: You were in bad physical shape then.

R: Yes. I was in bad shape then.

T: You mentioned some medical personnel that the Japanese had. What kind of care did they provide for you?

R: That was it. That was it. There was no care. They didn't take these bandages off until we went to that airbase in the middle of July.

(1, B, 423)

T: You mean those bandages were on for two months?

R: Right. Yes. The day we went up north there, they came in and got me out. Took me outside. This so-called doctor came and he had a wash basin with him with some water in it. Then there was an officer there. He was one of the officers that were going to go up north with us. So my hands by that time were really bad looking. I mean they had bandages still on them, but they stunk like heaven. They took off these bandages and my hands at that time were kind of into a fist-like. They were all curling up. The fingers. When they took the bandages off, there was maggots in there. Big ones. I've never seen such big ones. This officer, he had to look away even. But you know, those maggots, they cleaned my hands up perfect.

T: It's grotesque to think about it, but there is an actual value to them.

R: Right. That's what the doctor told me when I got back to the States. He said, "Those maggots saved your life, because they cleaned everything up."

T: They eat all the dead flesh, don't they?

R: Yes. Then of course, after that they left the bandages off. Because I had big scars on there. Had scar tissue on there. About a quarter of an inch of scar over the whole hands. Both hands. They looked like alligator hands. Bumped and stuff. Red color.

T: Back at Ofuna there, how often were you out of the cell you were in?

R: Just at night there. In fact, I didn't go out for a while. A month there, they wouldn't let you out even. But then after that you had to go out. You had to stand out by your door at night and call your number out.

T: And were you taken out and ever questioned at Ofuna?

R: No. No.

T: So you literally spent close to two months there just sitting in a cell.

R: Yes, sitting in a cell. Yes. Once in a while they would let you out. They would take you out for a little while and let you sit. Outside. But you couldn't talk to anybody. In fact, you couldn't sit anybody near you. You went out there and you sat there and looked. And this one time they took me out, I looked across the compound and I saw the top turret gunner. Now he was in the same place. So four of us were there.

T: So you could account for four members of your crew in this little facility.

R: Right.

T: That would be your substitute pilot for that night, your normal copilot, and your top turret gunner.

R: Right.

T: Now, you mentioned one other member of your crew came back, for a total of five.

R: Yes. Our engineer. But I don't know where…he was in Tokyo someplace, I guess. That's where they put him. I didn't see him until after the war was over and after I was in Cleveland. Because I used to go home to Wisconsin Rapids from Cleveland, and he was from Chicago. So I would stop in and call him from Chicago. He was in a hospital in Chicago. So I would stop and see him. He didn't say too much because he didn't know—he was the only one in jail. He was in a regular jail. With civilians.

T: Really?

R: Yes. There were quite a few of them, the B-29 guys that were in a civilian jail. Yes. With civilian Japanese. Yes.

T: When you saw your top turret gunner, did you guys talk about what happened when the plane got shot down or…

(1, B, 462)

R: No. No. We couldn't say anything. In fact, I didn't talk to him until after the war was over.

T: And at that point did you find yourself comparing POW experiences?

R: Yes. When we went up north, the six of us, we got up there at night. It was dark. When we got into this big room—they had a big room in a barracks. There was a picnic table in there and there were lights on. There was all this food there. God! We had food we never even heard of. We even had caviar up there.

T: That's bizarre almost, compared to what you'd been eating.

R: Oh, my God, yes. We had wine up there. And this old cook says—he must have looked at us, and he says, "You guys eat! Eat!" There were four guards with us on this train going up to this place and they were all there too. They were real nice fellows. They talked to us and could speak good English. This old guy, he was the cook up at this airbase. He said, "I'm the cook here. They got me in the Army. I was a banker in civilian life. I was too old to do any fighting, so they made a cook out of me."

T: He could speak English, though.

R: Oh, he could speak real good English. He was a well-educated man. He said, "I'm a Christian. I don't believe in this stuff."

T: It's a very interesting experience up there. You've described basically decent Japanese as far as the people—

R: Oh, yes.

T: …food, and not any poor treatment.

R: No. We didn't know what was going on. There was an officer there that came by every once in a while, and he was educated at Yale. So he talked to us quite a bit about being in school here at Yale. He said he was called back before the war, so he had to go back. But it was funny up there, because when we got there we were all wet. It was raining when they got off of this train. Then we had to walk to this camp. So when we got there we each had about six or eight blankets. So they gave us a blanket to cover up. They took off our clothes that we had, because they were wet. Then the blankets we made like mattresses out of them. Put them on the floor.

That first night. Man, did we sleep! Because we were on that train for twenty-four hours and we were sitting three and three. We were facing each other.

T: In a compartment.

R: No. No. Just on the seats. On a passenger train. And we were facing each other. Three on one side and three on the other. Then these officers were sitting behind us.

T: Did you know the other five Americans?

R: No. I didn't know them at the time. No. No. Not until we got on the train.

T: Were you able to talk once you got on the train?

R: Yes. Yes. We were talking with the civilians and everything. By the time we got up to where we were going…well, there was nobody left on the train anymore. They all had gotten off on the way up. But in the morning people were talking to us all the time. They were sitting in the aisles and all over. They were talking to us and asking us where we were from and where we were going and all that stuff. Just like a regular passenger train. No hard feelings or anything.

T: And this is in July, and the war is still on.

R: Yes.

T: Holy cow! This almost sounds like a surreal experience after what you've been through up until now.

R: Yes.

T: Were you suspicious at all or wondering what was…

(1, B, 505)

R: We had one from almost every part of the airplane, so we kind of figured maybe they've got an airplane. But then we said well, if they've got a B-29 they must have had a crew with it. So we couldn't figure out what we were there for. We had no idea.

T: Up there at this airfield by Aomori, were you questioned at all?

R: No. Not a thing. I wouldn't say that. At night, this old cook would come over every night after supper and he'd bring young kids with him. There were young kids up there. Probably fifteen, sixteen years old. And I think they were going to be kamikaze pilots. That's what I think they were training for, these young guys. They

were all going to school up there. And we'd see them in the morning going past our barracks going up to the airfield. They would wave to us and stuff. But they would come in and night and these young kids could speak English too. We had one fellow from Chicago.

T: A young kid from Chicago?

R: No. Well, that was with us. Of our six. And all these kids wanted to know about the Capone. They all heard about [Al] Capone. From Chicago. They all asked the guy from Chicago, "What about Capone?" Because they heard about him for some reason.

T: So they thought he knew about gangsters, because he was from Chicago.

R: Yes. Right *(chuckles)*.

T: But the [Japanese] kids weren't abusive at all.

R: No. No. They sat down… We had a big room. It was a big room. It was at least thirty feet around, all the way around. It was a big room. They sat in there with us. They talked. If some of them couldn't understand what we were talking about, this cook would explain to the kids what's what and stuff. It was really something. We'd go to sleep at night and they'd wake us up in the morning again and we'd go outside. There was grass out there. We'd lay out in the grass. We looked good. They gave us baths almost every other day if we wanted one. What the hell is going on? We couldn't figure out what was what.

T: So among yourself I can imagine discussions trying to figure out what was going on.

R: Yes. Yes. And then one day the air raid went off early in the morning. About four o'clock. We got up. What the heck is going on? We always had a little guard with us at night. We kind of got up, and all of a sudden we heard these fighters come in. Then we heard, as they were diving down and shooting, there were shells going through this building we left. Right outside of the place they had a big foxhole, so we—there was a little lull for a couple seconds. We all ran outside and we jumped in this big foxhole. Then we could see. The Navy was in with their torpedo bombers and stuff. Fighter bombers and stuff. They were blasting everything they could get their hands on. But there was no fighters. There was no anti-aircraft up there for these guys. In fact, this one Navy pilot, I don't know if he happened to see us in there, in this foxhole, but he flew around our barracks and flew right around. Made a circle around this foxhole. Of course, we all waved. I almost think that he saw that we were Americans. Because we could see him just as plain as day in that airplane. Then all of a sudden they all left. We weren't too far from the ocean there. So there must have been an aircraft carrier out there.

T: Right.

R: So the next morning they got us up bright and early and took us out in the field so, that in case they came back, that we wouldn't get killed. So then all of a sudden we saw the Corsairs [US fighter planes] come in. They had rockets and stuff. They were after this train down below us. The train there was the end of the line for the railroad there. It was as far as they went. We saw them blow up this train. Then they left and that was it.

T: So you could see the war getting closer.

(1, B, 557)

R: Yes. Yes. Yes. Because…even like this old guy. He even kind of—not as much as to say they think it's going to be ending before too long—but then when they dropped the first atomic bomb, they didn't say anything. We didn't know what was going on. Because that day we didn't get any food at night. He came up there and said, "I can't give you any food tonight. Something happened."

T: This is the cook telling you this.

R: Yes. Right. So then the next day it was different. We got our food again and stuff. And nobody said anything. Then when they dropped the next one, then there was that cease-fire, more or less, where the war was kind of over. They got us out of bed about five in the morning. This one guard we had, he was a real nice fellow. Young fellow. He came in and said, "Hey, you guys, the war is over! You're all going home." We said, "What?" And he said, "Yes. The war is over. Get dressed. We're going to take you down to Aomori." That's where this town was. All of a sudden a truck drives up, and we all got in this truck and went to Aomori.

T: So the six of you, did you go back to Ofuna or to Aomori?

R: No. We went to Ofuna then.

T: Back to Ofuna.

R: We got on this train in Aomori. Passenger train again. We had this whole car by ourselves.

T: So this time there were no civilians there.

R: No. They wouldn't let them on. We drove all the way to Tokyo and they wouldn't let any civilians on. There was about four or five guards on there with guns. They kept saying, "We're not here to hurt you. We're here to protect you." So we went back to Ofuna. We get to Ofuna of course, and it was in the afternoon. We walked into the prison camp there and of course, by that time they had all the walls down in

the camp. They knocked them all down so everything was open. All the barracks were together. We got in there and we looked pretty good. We had gained weight.

T: You had been gone about a month, right?

R: Yes. Got a nice suntan and our hair was all grown out. And this guy says, "Where in the hell were all you guys?" I said, "We were up by the rest camp." Kidding them. Then that's when we got to talk to everybody.

T: When you were at Ofuna before, the couple of months you spent in solitary confinement, how did you pass the time from day to day?

R: There were evidently people in this room before me. You would count the nails in the walls. Some people had things written on the walls. You'd read that over and over. That's all you did. Because you couldn't look outside because, like I say, everything was boarded up. You had no lights in there or anything. And in fact, you didn't want to be looking out the window anyway because if the guard saw you, you'd get a rifle butt in the back or something.

T: How did you keep your mind active? I can imagine sitting there day after day could almost drive you nuts.

R: What I did too after a while, my fingernails were all loose. All my fingernails were loose and they were all full of pus. So I'd always clean them out. I had a little box that I would spit in. I kept all my fingernails clean and took all the pus out. That's all I did. I was young. I was only about twenty years old or nineteen. I was going to be twenty years old.

T: Now, do you think being a young person made that situation easier?

R: Oh, sure. Definitely.

T: How so?

R: The ones that were married, they really had it rough. They were worrying about their wives and kids. I was a single young fellow, so if I didn't make it, I didn't make it. That's all. But they worried. The older guys were the ones that were in the worst shape when the war was over.

(1, B, 618)

T: Did you find yourself optimistic about making it through, or more pessimistic about not making it?

R: The first night I was there this little guard came in and he said, "Toelle, you die in the morning." He called me by Toelle. I thought, "What the hell? How does he know

my name?" But he was a rough guy. I figured well…by that time I felt pretty bad and I said it didn't make any difference if I was going to make it or not in the morning. Because I was really hurting. My hands hurt so bad and stuff.

Morning came and I got my cup of rice. I couldn't hardly eat it because I couldn't hold anything. They gave you chopsticks, but I didn't know how to use them, and I couldn't hold them in the first place because my hands were all wrapped up. But I tried to eat like a dog. I could get the stuff out of there.

T: So eating with your mouth as opposed to your hands?

R: Yes. I lots over fifty pounds the first, about the first month there.

T: How much did you weigh when you were shot down?

R: About 155 pounds. I wasn't that heavy, but I was in good shape though, because on Saipan we took care of ourselves. Then they weighed us. They weighed us after the first time when they took us out and, cripes, I was a little over one hundred pounds. They didn't say anything.

T: What kind of food did the Japanese supply there at Ofuna?

R: Just a cup of rice and some, what you call tea, that they must have put the leaves through and take them out. That was it. Nothing else. One little cup. Like a cup of coffee.

T: And the rice was served how many times a day?

R: Three times a day I had that.

T: So there was no other way to get other food? Obviously, you had what they gave you.

R: There was no other way to get it because you couldn't get out.

T: Did you have any problem with dysentery, things like that?

R: No, I didn't. No.

T: So health wise it was the very serious burns on your hands and legs.

R: Just the burns on the hands and my legs, yes, that gave me trouble.

T: What do you remember about the guards that you came into contact with here at Ofuna?

R: That one guard that told me he was going to kill me. For some reason or other, I don't know, he was just a mean character. If I wouldn't get up in the morning quick enough he would kick me in the side. Or he'd make me stand up and then he'd take his boots and rub them down my legs. He knew I was burned on my legs. He'd run his boots down from my knees to my ankles.

T: So you saw this guy more than once?

R: Yes. Yes. He was a regular guard.

T: Did he have a name?

R: I don't remember what it was anymore.

T: You saw this guy more than once though and he was…

R: Oh, yes. Almost every day. Yes.

T: One is tempted to use the adjective sadistic to describe what he was doing to you.

R: He wanted to pester me, I guess. I think what he was waiting for is to have me try to do something to him. But I didn't. I just stood there. When he'd go, I would go and lay down. That's all.

(1, B, 667)

T: Was it hard to maintain your composure at a time like that?

R: Well, you <u>had</u> to. At least I knew enough…because you could tell. He was just waiting, to do something to you. He always carried a rifle. He would swing that rifle at you and hit you wherever, your head or your back or wherever. So I didn't do anything. I had enough sense for that.

T: Do you remember being hit? Not only having your burns rubbed, but being hit with the rifle or a stick there.

R: A couple times I didn't get up fast enough in the mornings when he'd come in. After that I knew I had to get up. I always used to wake up early enough that I was waiting for him to open the door.

T: That will keep you sleeping light I guess, won't it?

R: *(Chuckles)*

T: So your time is this great contrast between the conditions at Ofuna and at that airfield by Aomori, where you really had, in comparison, much, much better, humane treatment.

R: Oh, yes. That's what saved us. Because we gained weight. All of us gained weight while we were up there, because we were all thin, and we had baths as often as we wanted them. In fact, they let us go in the bathtub first. You had these big bathtubs where you'd stand in. That's the way the Japanese had their bathtubs. You could stand in them. So they would put us in there first because the water wasn't as hot. Because we couldn't stand that real hot water that they could. So we'd get in there first. They'd give us soap and we had towels and everything. It was like a health spa.

T: It sounds like the POW Hilton.

R: Yes. Right.

T: This is the first bathing you've done since you were shot down?

R: Yes. Right. Yes. We needed it. Get out all those damn lice. You were <u>full</u> of them.

T: Did you have a problem with lice at Ofuna?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. You used to have pets. You'd feel them running up and down your body at night. And I couldn't do anything with them. You couldn't catch them anyway. They were terrible.

T: From your perspective there at Ofuna, what would you say was the most difficult part of that experience?

R: Just laying there waiting to see what's going to happen. That's all.

T: You mean the uncertainty?

R: Yes. Then you couldn't <u>talk</u> to anybody. I was getting thinner. I could tell. My bones were starting to come out more. We didn't know what was going on. You couldn't talk to anybody that they brought in, any new recruits or anything, because there was no way you could talk to anybody.

T: Was there any way…did people communicate by trying to tap or make any kind of code signals or…

R: No.

T: So you essentially went a couple of months almost literally in the dark as far as communication.

R: Right. We did. Yes.

T: Did you find yourself concerned at Ofuna, or at the airfield by Aomori, about what might happen to you as a group or individually if the Japanese actually lost the war?

(1, B, 722)

R: We didn't know it at the time, until after the war was over, then we heard that if America invaded Japan we would all be killed. That was an order. To kill all the POWs throughout the whole country.

T: And this is something that you only learned after the war was over.

R: Right.

T: Did you find yourself thinking about that in any way…

R: Not really. No. Because when we got up to this airbase up there, if they were going to kill us, why would they send us way up there? They could have killed us way before that already. Which a lot of them were killed before that in other camps. There was a lot of B-29 guys that they beheaded. They'd take them out at night and kill them. For no reason.

T: Because of what they were.

R: They killed one whole crew. The war was over and they were, I think they were shot down on one of the last days. This officer was so mad that ran this camp that he killed the whole bunch. Shot them all. Took them all outside and shot them all. And the war was over then already.

T: So really there's an element of chance as far as where you came down and who found you.

R: Yes. The Navy I think was the best. The best part of the Japanese. That was the elite. That was their main branch. They treated us more or less like human beings.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: So you feel you were fortunate to come down in Navy hands as opposed to Army or civilian.

R: Yes. Civilian you would never make it. No. They'd kill you. They used to chop the guys up with shovels and axes and everything.

T: Did you have, to double check, were you ever on any work detail at either place?

R: No. No. They wouldn't let us out. The Navy guys in our camp, they used to let those guys out. Not out of the camp, but outside. I heard if you wanted to smoke there you had to kill one hundred flies for one cigarette. And then every night you would go out in the compound and you could have your flies, and you'd count your flies, and if you had one hundred you'd get a cigarette. Then you could smoke it. But that's all the cigarettes you got. So what the guys used to do, they'd get together and they'd get one hundred flies and maybe have two or three guys and you'd puff on the cigarette. I didn't smoke so it didn't make any difference. But some of the guys…see, after we were there for a month they would give you a cigarette if you were a smoker. Some of the guys said those Japanese cigarettes turn all colors.

T: You were back at Ofuna to be evacuated.

R: Yes.

T: And moved back there. Is that where you actually got the news about the war being over? Back at Ofuna?

R: No. No. Up at that other camp.

T: The airfield near Aomori, that's right.

R: And then when we got back to Ofuna, then the B-29s dropped stuff down to us. First the Navy came in there. There was a Navy pilot that flew over this place almost every day. He'd drop stuff down to us. He'd come over this prison camp as low as he could go and he'd drop like newspapers and stuff down. Once in a while they'd come into the compound. We knew the war was over then already. Then the B-29s started dropping in food with the fifty gallon drums. They'd parachute it in. We had so much food there that you wouldn't believe. We had food. We had cigarettes. We had <u>rooms</u> of cigarettes. And we'd have to double up with the guys in the rooms because we didn't have any room to sleep anymore.

(2, A, 25)

T: From famine to feast.

R: *(chuckles)* Yes.

T: Were the Japanese guards still around, or had they disappeared?

R: They took all the old guards out and then we just had young kids, young guys, come in there. But they weren't guards anymore. They were guards so civilians wouldn't come in. They said, "We're not guards like the other ones were. We're just here until we make sure that the civilians can't get in here and harm you guys."

T: Did that ever happen? Did you have civilians come there?

R: No. Never.

T: So everyone waited there at the camp. There were some drops of supplies until the Marines came and took everyone out the same time?

R: Right. Yes. We all left together. Yes. They had trucks there. Those big trucks. And we all got in and went out to Yokohama there, and then we got on a train and went out to that airbase where we stayed.

T: To move ahead here, you were at Formosa briefly and the Philippines before you took a ship back to the United States. Got back in November of 1945 and spent some time, about a year you said, in hospitals.

R: Yes. A whole year.

T: Letterman and Crowell Hospitals. Both of those. When you got back, to check, were your folks still alive? Your mom and dad?

R: Oh, yes.

T: How soon was it when you got back to the States in November that you saw them?

R: During the cease-fire, the Swiss Red Cross came in, to Ofuna. They wrote letters for us. Then they mailed them to the States. So my folks knew that.

T: Was that the first news, hard news, they had that you were still alive?

R: Well, yes. They were notified by the Air Corps that we were missing in action. That's all they knew. Because the Japs never told who was alive and who was dead.

T: Right. So you didn't see your folks then until at least after November.

R: Yes. It was, probably about the middle of December is when I got home. They gave me a two week vacation, furlough like. I was there until after Christmas [1945]. When I came back.

T: When you saw your folks then, how much—and you had a couple of sisters too. How much did they ask you about your POW experience?

R: Not too much. Not too much. They knew I was a prisoner of war because when they took us out of Ofuna the Associated Press was there. We were the first bunch to leave Japan. Because they said, that was an unauthorized camp. Why was it an

unauthorized camp, I don't know. But anyway, the Associated Press came in and they took pictures of us as we left.

T: This is after 15 August.

(2, A, 55)

R: Yes. This is when we left Ofuna. It was in September. Before we really left there. Then there was the newsreels they had. They had me on the newsreel.

T: So they literally saw you and had a visual image of you before you arrived.

R: Right. Oh, yes. They showed my hands, because I was the only one that was burned in that camp that lived. The rest of them, they all died. Infections and stuff. We brought back eight fellows from there [Ofuna]. Eight boxes of ashes from there. People that died.

T: Your recollection is that your folks didn't ask a whole lot?

R: Not too much. They were just glad to see me home, I guess.

T: Do you think it was more that they didn't ask or that you didn't tell?

R: I don't know. Probably…well, there was a few, the newspapers, you know. Come into the house and ask questions.

T: You had the newspapers come to your house?

R: Yes. And they'd take pictures there. Then I had speaking things at luncheons and stuff. That's about all. Really.

T: That was in Wisconsin Rapids.

R: Right.

T: What was that like, Ray? Being asked to, really so soon after, to talk about things.

R: Well, I think it was good, because you knew you were back home and everything was going to be okay. When I left the hospital there to come home they said, when you come back we'll make you like new.

T: When your local press came to talk to you, was it hard to give them details about what you'd been through?

R: Not really, because I knew a lot of those people that worked for the paper. It wasn't that bad. Things didn't bother me that much as some fellows. Some fellows had a hard time. That's just the way I was, I guess.

T: And that's obviously where these couple questions are going. We find and we ask people how easy they found it to talk about things. And what I hear you saying is, it wasn't incredibly difficult.

R: No. Not really. There wasn't that many B-29 guys left. A lot of those fellows that I knew never made it back. They got shot down and we never heard of them. There was only—like, I'm the only one left from my crew. The rest are all dead. There was one other friend of mine, this one that had gotten shot down a month earlier. He's from California. He's the only one that I know that's alive that was a prisoner of war. I met him on the Philippines in this time when we were coming back to the States. We kept in touch ever since.

T: And he wasn't even on your crew.

R: No. No. He was with our group, but not on our crew. But he was on a daylight mission, was flying with our group. So we saw him get shot down. But we didn't know who bailed out. But we saw a few of them bail out. But we didn't know who was who.

T: You could see chutes, but you didn't know who they were.

R: Right. And he was the only one left out of his crew. The rest were all killed when they hit the ground because they were shot down during the day.

(2, A, 98)

T: When you were in the hospitals there for a year, they took care of your burns with plastic surgery. Did the service do any kind of debriefing or questioning about your POW experience?

R: No. No. Nothing. Nothing.

T: So it was purely the physical aspects that they were dealing with, and when your burns were taken care of then you were good to go.

R: Yes. That's all. This doctor I had, he was one of the top surgeons in Cleveland. He was a plastic surgeon and he was really good. He knew what he was doing. So when he got done with one hand and fixed it up, it looked good. Worked on the other one. I figured, things are going to be okay.

T: It was a long process.

R: Oh, yes.

T: Did you find it hard to stay optimistic about finally getting through all that stuff?

R: No. Because I kind of enjoyed it there at the hospital. Because they took care of you real good there. It was nice. You had a nice area. There were other people in there. There were wards, big wards. Most of the fellows—I was about the only Air Corps guy in there. The rest were all from the Army and stuff. They were making thumbs and fingers and ears and noses and everything there. It was interesting.

T: Did you feel yourself, in that hospital setting, to be fortunate in any way about…when you looked at those other…

R: Oh, yes. Definitely. I wasn't quite as bad as a lot of them were. Like I say, most of them were Army people and they got hurt from shells, hand grenades and shells, where they blew their hands off and their fingers off. But the hospital was nice. Everybody was real good there in the hospital. They gave you good care. It was really good. You really felt that the Army was doing a good thing for you. Because it wasn't that big of a hospital, [weren't] that many people in there. They just did certain things.

T: This was Crowell.

R: Yes.

T: You mentioned you were able to come and go from the hospital too.

R: Yes.

T: So you weren't in there for a solid year.

R: Oh, no. I could go home. They always sent me home after they took my bandages off and all the stitches out, and then I would be there for a couple of weeks and then they would send me home. Because they always gave me braces for my fingers and stuff. They said, "You go on home and use your braces at home. You'd be better off to go back home." Then when your couple of weeks were up they'd bring you back.

T: That's a pretty good system.

R: Oh, yes. It kept you good. One thing: Cleveland was really an ideal place to spend some time. You couldn't buy anything in Cleveland.

T: Really?

R: No. A soldier couldn't buy <u>anything</u>. Everything was free. Buses were all free and your meals were all free. The theaters were all free.

T: This is in 1946 now too, isn't it?

(2, A, 136)

R: Yes. There was nothing in Cleveland as far as the service was concerned. It was just this hospital really. And you'd go to the USO Club. My God. You could go anywhere you wanted to. They had all kinds of places where you could go. They'd come and pick you up and take you home. All that. So it was really, you were really appreciated by the people of Cleveland at that time.

T: It sounds like you have, and had then, a pretty positive outlook on life.

R: Oh, yes. Yes. I figured everything was going to be right after I got out. And I said, Well, I'll just work for a while. Then I'll retire early and enjoy it. And that's just what I did.

T: You pretty much did things the way you were describing. After you got out of, really were evacuated from Japan and time after that, what images from your POW experiences came back as dreams or flashbacks to you after that?

R: They still do yet. When I watch TV and I see—and I watch the history stuff on TV. I see a lot of our B-29 group and I see our B-29 squadrons on [TV] that brings back all the memories that you had. Then you start thinking a little bit that maybe I could be one of those guys that are going down in this airplane. If you went down in the plane, very few of them, very few of them got out.

T: Is that something you knew when you were flying too?

R: Oh, yes. I saw a lot of them blow up. Yes. People where they were trying to get out to the ocean where they could bail out. You'd see them go, and all of a sudden there would be an explosion over there and…nothing. Like I said, we had four thousand gallons of gasoline when we left there. That's a lot of gasoline.

T: When that goes up, you're in little pieces.

R: Yes. And one hundred octane, it doesn't take much. So if you got hit, you better get out. Once that airplane started going down, swirling around, you just didn't get out. It would pin you right up against the wall and there you'd stay.

T: If you have had or if you have dreams, are those the kind of things that come in your own dreams? From your POW time?

R: Some of them I still do. Yes. The wife hollers at me once in a while *(chuckles)*.

T: Do you have them as often as you did in 1945 or…

R: Oh, no. No. No. Since I retired it changed the whole thing. I used to worry a lot about it before because of the conditions, the working conditions. Once I retired, it didn't bother me anymore. I just got more or less at ease. Relaxed.

T: So you've noticed a difference in yourself since you've been retired.

R: Oh, yes *(with emphasis)*. Yes.

T: So you've noticed dreams more right after the war as opposed to later.

R: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes, as time went by it just doesn't bother me anymore.

T: What specific things, from being shot down or being in the camps, did come back in your dreams when you had them?

R: I used to dream about being in this room. Because it was such a small room. And you didn't know what was going on. That was the worst thing. Because…it was dark in there all the time. One thing I still do, I have to have a nightlight on in the house.

T: And that's from…that reminds you of the darkness from that room.

R: Yes. Because it was dark in that room. There was no lights in there day or night.

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T: And the windows were boarded up, you said.

R: The windows were boarded up and there was no lights in the room. There was just the light that came through the door. They had a little, about a foot square, window in the door where the guards could look in. And that was it. You couldn't see out, [couldn't] know what was going on.

T: How could you tell day from night?

R: You had some light coming through. They weren't boarded up that tight. There was cracks in the window. So you could tell. You could tell by how you got fed. In the morning they got you up. They gave you your tea and rice. You knew it was morning. At noon you'd get another one. And at night, like say five o'clock or so, you got another cup of rice. So you knew that was getting toward the end.

T: So you could literally…that was the clock, of sorts.

R: Yes. I'd lay awake at night until I heard the air raid sirens. Almost every night. Because I knew then when the air raid siren went off, I knew that the Americans were coming again to bomb. Then I'd go to sleep.

T: So there were interesting ways to chart the passage of time.

R: Yes.

T: That's interesting to know what really time of day it was or what part of the day.

R: Yes.

T: On a different subject. Have you used the Veterans Administration since you got out of the service?

R: Oh, yes. I'm there all the time. Yes, they take care of me. All my medication and stuff. Yes.

T: Do you have one hundred percent disability with them?

R: Yes. Yes.

T: And when did you get one hundred percent?

R: I had one hundred percent when I first got out. Then I was cut back to seventy…

T: They cut you back?

R: Yes. I don't know why, but they did. See that was my own fault really. When I got out I didn't take a medical discharge. Because somebody had told me, don't take a medical discharge because if you do, you aren't going to get a job.

T: Because it would be on your record.

R: Yes. So I listened to the guy. Then when I lost my job with Kroger's [grocery store], then I went back. Then I got eighty percent. I got boosted up another ten. Then after I came to Milwaukee down here and I started volunteering at the VA, then I got another ten percent. That put me to ninety. Then a few years back I went again to talk to this doctor. He said, "Yes, we'll take care of you." So then I got one hundred percent and it's been maybe ten years.

T: So about the mid-90s it sounds like.

R: Yes. Right.

T: How would you rate your satisfaction with your local VA there in Milwaukee?

R: Oh, I love it out here. Really good. Like I told you, I volunteered there for eighteen years. What we do, we worked in the pharmacy for about sixteen years of

that. My wife and I both. We put up medications. We check medications and we sent it out. We didn't pick it. We just checked to make sure they got the right stuff. And I really enjoyed working in there. But then it got too much, because my legs started to bother me too much. Because it was all standing. We have an office there for the POWs. We are there for the POWs that come into the hospital. To help them out. We go visit them and stuff.

(2, A, 236)

T: So you still go there?

R: Yes. Every Wednesday, from seven o'clock in the morning until noon.

T: Do you like keeping yourself busy like that?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. Sure. You can only cut grass so much you know *(chuckles)*.

T: You can cut it, but it doesn't grow any faster *(laughs)*.

R: For a while it was growing too much. No, we enjoy it. We meet a lot of people there. Like the Legion is there. The VFW. The DAV. They're all in this one area. So we get to meet a lot of people these eighteen years that we've been there. They're all doing the same thing we are. They're all helping out the veterans that are there.

T: Does your VA there in Milwaukee have any kind of POW support group?

R: We used to, yes. But our group is getting so small now. We've lost over thirty members of our group within the last ten years. So we're getting down to where there's maybe ten people that are in our group that are kind of active. Like you're talking about Marvin [Roslansky, POW]. I've known Marv for many, many years, and he's in our group. In fact, he's our commander now this year. He was last year too.

T: Yes. He keeps himself busy with that.

R: Yes. Yes. We have a few others that do the same things. They're busy helping. Like I say, our support group we used to have, it kind of broke up because there just wasn't anybody there to go anymore.

T: When did that support group get started? Do you remember?

R: We were in there for about fifteen years. So it was fifteen years ago is when it was really good. We had a big bunch at that time.

T: All World War II POWs?

R: Just World War II. And three-quarters of them were from Europe. Very few of us from the Pacific. In fact, I'm the only one right now that is from the Pacific. Well, except for Marv.

T: How do you think that support group was good for you? In what ways?

R: They got us a lot of stuff. We got a lot of things through the hospital by having this group. It helped some of them to…they started telling stories and their experiences. A lot of people would never talk about it. But when you get the POWs together like we were, everybody talked about their experience. What they did. How they got captured and what they did while they were in prison camp. But then you know, you talk to the ones from Europe, and their prison camp is altogether different than the Japanese were. Like day and night. It was good for you to have all this stuff come out.

T: You mentioned for yourself that you had never found it really all that difficult to talk about things.

R: No, I didn't. No.

T: Do you think the support group helped you anyway even though you hadn't had…

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R: Not that much, because, like I say, most of them were Army men. There's a difference between what they went through and what I went through, as far as their service. I used to kid everybody. I said we were in the Air Force. We won the war. That started all up, you know. They'd argue about, you guys flying up there doing nothing. You lived so nice. You had good barracks and all that stuff. It was good for everybody. You got it off your chest, I guess. You felt pretty good really.

T: Between the guys from Europe and the Pacific, with different experiences, how do you talk to each other? What is the common ground there?

R: We have quite a few Air Corps guys in our group. The 15th Air Force. They flew B-17s and a few of them were B-24s and some were in the B-26s and stuff. I used to kid them all the time. I said, "Oh, you guys, we used to use your airplanes for training and stuff like that."

T: So there's kind of a friendly banter between you.

R: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. And they'd say oh, yes. We were on missions for three, four hours. I'd say, what are you talking about? We were on for sixteen, seventeen hours. Yes, they'd fight back and forth that way, and that was good for both of us.

T: It sounds like from what you're saying, a number of guys seemed to benefit from that then.

R: Oh, sure. Yes. Yes.

T: Well listen, about the last thing I have to ask you is this: when you think about your POW experience in 1945, what would you say is the most important way that that changed you as a person?

R: I think what changed me was that you lived day for day, because when you were in prison camp that's the way you lived. Each day. You lived when you were alive. And I live now the same way. I do things day for day. I plan on doing them, and I do them. Tomorrow morning if I'm not here, well, that's different.

T: So a day to day approach.

R: Yes. Yes.

T: Is that different from the person who went over to Saipan in 1944?

R: It was after I started flying. Yes. Because we saw a lot of them…as we went along, the longer we were there, the worse it got. Because not too many of them made that length of missions. So you lived over there almost the same way. Mission for mission. Because you didn't know if you were coming back or not. You enjoyed yourself while—if you flew in the afternoon or in the evening—we enjoyed ourselves during the day, because we didn't know if you were going to make it back or not.

T: And it sounds like you kept that kind of approach of day to day living, when you got out of the service, too.

R: Yes. That's right.

T: Anything else you want to add, Mr. Toelle, before we conclude?

R: I think we talked just about everything there.

T: On the record, then, I will thank you very much for taking time to do this interview for the POW Oral History Project, based at Concordia University, St Paul. At this point I'll turn the recorder off.

END OF INTERVIEW